

Lauren Rosewarne

BLACKOUT

In southern states in the US they serve a dessert called Blackout Cake. The name, I guess, comes from the colour; the inky darkness of the cake and the sooty icing and the dark cake-crumb covering. When I first saw it on a menu in New Orleans, I had a vague idea of it being made without electricity; perhaps at midnight by some flouncily-dressed drawling belle.

The night we had the blackout in my building, I dreamt about blackout cake. Word association perhaps; or maybe low blood sugar. I'd fallen asleep at nine and woke a few hours later. The bathroom light wouldn't go on. The clocks on the DVD player and set-top box and microwave and treadmill were dull. The toilet wouldn't flush; tap water was a flaccid trickle. Midnight, so I went back to bed: to sleep, to dream, to wake up and have order restored. And I did dream. About cloying cake and Bourbon Street and the ex-boyfriend who moved there after the Hurricane. Because Louisiana needed to be retaught to party.

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Before getting out of bed, before checking and rechecking switches and taps and assessing whether I could still watch *Rage*, of course I thought of you. Not that I didn't think of you most mornings—I'm a masochist, it's par for the course—but that morning I was stuck on the idea of witching hour events. Like breaking a glass in the night and waking and not knowing where the shards came from. Like spilling lemonade, delaying clean-up and in the morning wondering why everything was sticky. Like you texting me with a confession of affection. And me waking and reading and rereading the messages. Vacillating between disbelief and rapture. Analysis. Analysis. Of sensing change.

The blackout. In bed and things seemed ordinary. Sun filled my poky apartment and the sounds of distant traffic gave the impression of order. Normality. Getting up, vaguely smelling urine and seeing no green-glowing numbers and hearing no hum from the fridge and this was not my normal. No toast, I could accept. I could eat bread from the bag, but no sound? *No sound?*

Weeks after I first flew away from you, the earliest symptoms of psychosomatic sickness appeared. Supersonic hearing. In your company and I lost hearing in one ear. Completely deaf. Right ear. A few oceans between us and the recovery was miraculous. *Lancet* miraculous. Suddenly I could hear the blood in my head, my blinking, the voices. I could hear each footstep. Heartbeat. Squeaking behind my left eye. I'd dragged my suitcase into my apartment and the fridge was so loud and Sunday bullshit revival songs boomed from next door and I could hear the conclusions I'd never be ready for. I grappled for my earphones. Frank Black and the Catholics. You could have my mental health, you could have my *Six Feet Under* DVDs, but you were *never* getting Frank.

The blackout. No sound. No water. Stale bread. I wasn't paying three hundred and fifty dollars a week to live like this. I'd showered and washed my hair the night prior, but without water I felt filthy. I imagined sweat and smoky hair and a putrid melange of fetid, menstrual, coital odours. I could smell ammonia. Anomie. Pommy wash. Only slightly less revolting than soaking in your own filth. The Brits have much to answer for. Face, feet, fanny. When my brother and I were little we would sometimes sleep at my grandparent's house. I have a memory of standing in their lounge room, the scorch of the heater, the laboured panting of a dying white Labrador. My grandmother's mandate of face, feet and fanny washing. I could fabricate details of my brother and I naked, my grandparents watching, coercing some kind of incestuous, pedophilic romp—alas, my childhood was rather ordinary. For posterity, I'll note that a one-litre bottle of tepid water does quite a decent amount of pommy washing. Messy, but manage-

able. Disgusting but doable.

Unless harbouring a balcony-related deathwish, there's only one exit from my apartment and that's into the corridor. Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon Prison thesis loosely describes the layout: apartments around the edges and instead of a guard tower in the middle, there's a stairwell. Normal circumstances and the corridor lighting is on around the clock. Normal circumstances and green exit signs light up the stairwell. The blackout and the corridor and stairs were in complete darkness.

My brother once sent me a text message. He had parked his car illegally in the side street near my building; called me down to collect a book. I was drying my hair at the time and was disinclined to go downstairs damp. Sentiments which I expressed in my reply. He called me Rapunzel. *Rapunzel*. His comment was about hair, although in light of a blackout, in light of dormant elevators and pitch black stairwells, the moniker was apt. Twenty-four flights up and my apartment was indeed a tiny well lit cell.

It took a few seconds in the black corridor before my other senses kicked in. I wasn't alone. A realisation quickly illustrated by a bright bouncing square. Broken English. Female. Did I know what happened? Stockholm. Glasgow. St Petersburg. Istanbul. Minneapolis. Liverpool. Wellington. Could I name all the cities I've missed you in? Sure, I'm wonderful at melancholy. I travel frequently, too frequently, but it's the only time when I can justify emotional upheaval; at home and it's just indulgent. Not that it would surprise you but I have a thing about guide books. No maps because I can't read them, but my hostility towards guide books is about resenting being *guided*. Swayed. And by not wielding a tattered *Lonely Planet*, no matter where I am, I'm always asked for directions. No *Lonely Planet*, or maybe its just my 'everywog' look that makes me pass as local. Are you Jewish? You look Jewish. Arab? And that miraculous ability to guide lost people to the Spanish Steps kicked in. Being asked what had happened and I answered. A blackout. The emergency lighting burnt out overnight. No water because the electricity is needed to pump it up. Blah blah blah. I've no idea if she knew what I was talking about but perhaps I sounded vaguely articulate; academics build careers from the ruse after all. Was I going downstairs? She'd tried apparently—by the glow of her Blackberry—but panicked two floors down. Panicked. I wish I didn't understand the word. Thanks for that, by the way. Panic. Like when you try and check out of a hotel but can't manage words because you can't manage breath. Like when you sit in the back of a cab, feel a heavy hand on your shoulder and know it's no consolation prize. Like airport hugs that only delay the hysteria. There's a genre of

self-help books. Feel the fear. Feel the fear and do it anyway. I won't mock. My last book has an audience with people wanting to feel better. *Schadenfreude*. It must be.

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The blackout. From the black corridor and back into my blinding apartment. The *second* it occurred that leaving might be hard, I *had* to flee. I rang Dad. Dad, because the only advice he's ever given me was not to pay more than three dollars a kilo for washing powder. I told him that I would pack a bag and go into work. If the power wasn't back on later, I'd go to their place. I had a plan. Too *scared* to venture down twenty-four flights of stairs in the dark? I think not.

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Another mental illness I caught after you—caught; honed—was control. The thorough, all-encompassing need to control. Everything. Sounds. Emotions. Routine. I needn't seek out the self-help section to know it's borne from having had *no* control with you. Of you. It's manic now. From wanting to skin alive someone for asking me where I'll be at five-PM to having students steal my time by not turning up to appointments. To wanting to slay that perfume wench at Myer for spritzing me with the perfume I binned at the airport when I left you the second time. Being imprisoned a second longer and I'd vomit. And no water to wash my teeth!

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The blackout. What do I take? What do I need to save from the hordes of marauding looters? There's nothing and too much of you everywhere. Most nights I get in bed and think of you banging your knee on the sharp corner. Even if I get in there with someone else. Every morning I open my door and think about that afternoon you came over—when things were platonic and we were flirting bumbling morons—and I closed the door with half my skirt in the corridor. And when I'm waiting for the elevator, I think of us, a year or so later, returning after midnight. It was your birthday and you were drunk and for reasons I don't remember there was an industrial fan drying carpet in the corridor. And you, you with no strength and no body mass and no spirit for recklessness, picked it up and moved it. And I laughed hysterically. And I don't know why I found it funny. And I don't know how you *didn't* find it funny that we had to rebuild my bed halfway through sex that night. And I've *absolutely* no idea how you could sit opposite me in so many fucking cafés and watch me cry. And remain so thoroughly unfazed.

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My brother sometimes reads drafts of my writing. He's said it enough times for the words to be redundant: he sees you in my writing and *hates* it. Somehow, he's thoroughly convinced that had it not been for you I'd be some happy-go-lucky bon vivant.

Floral dresses perhaps; daisies in my hair. The last time you were in Melbourne. I took you to meet him at the café he was working in. You and I in the back of a taxi. Winter. My brother the good guy, everyone's friend, the likeable sibling. And he gave you the brush off. He forced a smile which was more like a sneer and spent far too long behind the coffee machine. You thought this was riotously funny; were highly entertained by the way you thought he *pretended* not to like you. I still wonder if he spat in your mocha. My brother has never said it in so many words, but his inference is that I've granted you too much power. I'm smarter than that, apparently. *Smarter*. I've had *thousands* of epiphanies about you. The most recent is knowing you're a cancer. Or at least that how I feel for you is cancerous. I'm surprised the metaphor didn't occur earlier. Sometimes I forget you long enough to function for an hour or two without pangs, but you're still there. There was a life of health before you and now life there's life with diagnosis. My brother has some strange ideas about time and moving on and the skills that intellect apparently bestow. I like the cancer metaphor because there's imagery. I'm thinking of medical shows with an x-ray on a lightbox; a doctor points to a shadow on a lung. A shadow. A shadow that spreads. That gnaws and poisons and *robs fucking blind*. I'm surprised the epiphany took so long. I've walked down streets—streets in Moscow in Chicago in Brisbane in Edinburgh—walking and thinking and wearing sunglasses and pretending they hide tears—and knowing—knowing without a doubt in the world—that something was eating me from the inside. Cancer. How I did I not think of it sooner? And your star sign too. Because someone's getting a laugh.

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The blackout. So I wheel my case with my laptop, a change of underwear and a bag of cosmetics, into the corridor. And my passport. Naturally. The only gift you ever gave me—a copy of *Fowler's Guide to Modern English Usage*; a slap in the face to a writer if ever there was one—is in my office at the university. I don't open it. I never ever have. A pile of paperwork sits on top so I don't have to look at it. Of course, each morning I see the paperwork and know perfectly well what's underneath.

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I am ridiculously clumsy. Odds on, if I cook each time there'll be an incident of charred flesh or sliced skin. Odds on and I'll roll an ankle most days and fall flat on my face fortnightly. If I drop something on the floor, it's highly likely I'll bang my head when I stand. The idea therefore, of walking down twenty-four flights of stairs with a suitcase in one hand and a scarcely bright mobile phone in the other, had disaster written all over it. There are many things I am bad at. Maths. Small talk. Sitting still. Waiting. Biting my tongue. Things involving physical coordination. When my brother worked at the café, a sometimes-homeless guy used to

do palm-readings from a table out the back. He worked on donation. He told me that I was bad at finishing things. I tried not to look incredulous—the words on the tip of my tongue were that I had a PhD at 25, *moron*—but I kept quiet and gave the charlatan a guiltily generous donation. Finishing things. I can't *not* finish things. No matter how stupid or difficult or destructive. No matter the wounds, no matter the tears. I'm a finisher. And I was *damn* well going to get to the ground floor with my suitcase and mobile phone and my ungainly clumsiness. And I was going to get dripped on in the stairwell. And I was going to think that climbing downhill in darkness, with *baggage*, encapsulates my life. And I was going to realise that the blackout—along with everything from Obama to Michael Jackson to getting tenure to every fucking album I'd ever listen to alone—was something I'd never get to tell you about.

Three months after I moved into the apartment I got my first electricity bill. One hundred and sixty dollars. Even calling the space an apartment feels like hyperbole. One hundred and sixty dollars. I rang the power company. Accurate apparently, but they had a solution. Blankets. No, not more on my bed. On the *windows*. As insulation. No, she wasn't joking. Because as though things aren't sad enough in there, I might consider *blanketing* out the views?

The first man to ever visit was the stilt walker. He looked at my bedroom, gestured to the crooked wall around the bed which apparently justifies the 'one bedroom' rent. Little windows cut into the wall, complete with glass and pull down blinds. The stilt walker called it a humidicrib. Funny. Less funny was minutes later when he began throwing pieces of fruit off my balcony. Just to see how quickly they'd fall. You were the second man in there. You walked in, looked around, stroked your chin and said, 'If you got rid of the treadmill you'd have more space.' You and I stood out on the balcony, the sides of our arms just touching. I pointed to that church in North Melbourne; the one where all the underworld funerals are held. I'd point that church out to four men after you. Nothing happened between you and I that visit. Or the following. In fact, I had to travel to the other side of the world for consummation. I'm amused by people speaking righteously about never paying for sex. We've *all* fucking paid for sex. The most recent man out on the balcony could have been a contender. Almost. Almost, until that moment when, in a café of course, he started speaking in paranoid riddles. About things his therapist had said. About prescriptions. About past partners. About pining. About pining. About pining. And I didn't even hesitate. I looked across at him, put my hand over his. The words of soothing, saving, came so instantly – so, so, so instantly –

because of course, I knew the script. I knew how to counsel! and hair-stroke and skin-stroke. And knew the script and should have known that it would end before I was ready. But I didn't. Because I'm a finisher.

The blackout. Just as the sun was falling I wheeled my case to the entrance of the building. I could see the lights on in the foyer but I wasn't entirely convinced. Only inside the lift did I realise things were likely okay again. I turned the lights on in the apartment, wheeled my case into the centre of the room. I turned on the television, flushed the toilet. It was over. I looked at my case. Four times. Four separate returns from trips spent with you. Four times when a trip that was supposed to change everything didn't change anything. Four trips where I'd wheel a case back into a silent apartment. Alone. Where I'd put on music, turn the television on, rapidly start unpacking and washing clothes and pretending none of it happened. Purging. Trying frantically not to see something or smell something or think something that might remind me of you. And there'll be a point – perhaps when a CD ends or when I'm alone in bed—when I'll realise that that everything is back to normal. That *my* normal doesn't include you. That my normal is a small, well-lit apartment in Melbourne where the power is usually on and the water usually runs and where you aren't.

Lauren Rosewarne is a political scientist based at the University of Melbourne. Her third non-fiction book, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management*, will be released in early 2011. Lauren is very new to publishing fiction. 